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ABSTRACT

Traditional surveys of children's literature have examined features such as text structure and topic, but have failed to take into account rhetorical elements such as author/reader distance, commentary, point of view, and inside view (insight into characters' minds). Similarly, they have glossed over aspects of character to character interaction, such as responses to interpersonal conflict. A children's story survey was conducted to determine the prevalence and distribution of a story's rhetorical elements, to examine the relationship between traditional measures of story complexity and a conflict complexity measure, and to explore relationships that might exist between preference ratings of the stories and the coding of the stories' rhetorical elements. Of the 32 stories examined, 29 exhibited conflict, especially interpersonal conflict. Inside view was found to be more prevalent in the upper level stories. The results suggest that this model of author/reader interactions and conflict is one step towards a richer language for discussing stories and for enhancing children's understanding of stories. (HOD)

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Reading Education Report No. 18

HIGHER-LEVEL FEATURES IN CHILDREN'S STORIES: RHETORICAL STRUCTURE AND CONFLICT

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Higher-Level Features in Children's Stories:
Rhetorical Structure and Conflict

Traditional surveys of children's literature have examined features such as text structure and topic, but have failed to take into account rhetorical elements such as author-reader distance, commentary, point of view, and insight into characters' minds. Similarly, they have glossed over aspects of character-to-character interaction such as responses to interpersonal conflict. These "higher-level features" of stories may be what makes stories interesting to read. They are also principal contributors to story complexity, and hence, to difficulty for beginning readers. With regard to both interestingness and complexity, it is important to come to a better understanding of these features.

To concretize our discussion, we first present two examples showing the importance of higher-level text features. Second, we sketch a theory of higher-level story features. Then, we briefly describe how we are applying our analysis to a selection of children's stories. Finally, we discuss some implications of this work.

Examples

To illustrate a higher-level text feature which we have

studied in children's stories, let us consider the following modified fairy tale:

> Once upon a time, there lived a little girl who always wore a red cloak with a big red hood. One day her mother asked her to take a cake to her ailing grandmother. Being fond of her grandmother, she put on her cloak and joyfully started out on the errand. The little girl took a path through the woods gathering nuts and flowers along the way. By and by, she reached her grannie's cottage. When she knocked at the door, the old woman welcomed her in. They both sat down and had some cake together. After they were finished, the little girl said goodbye and went home.

Someone who heard this story might well say, "And what happened?" Clearly, something is missing from the story, even though the words, the sentence structures, the characters, and the topic are similar to those in "Little Red Riding Hood." But who would remember Little Red Riding Hood today if she had never encountered the wolf? It seems that conflict is an essential ingredient in this story, and perhaps for stories in general. As the novelist John Le Carre (Barber, 1977) says, "The cat sat on the mat, is not a story. The cat sat on the dog's mat, is a story."

Conflict makes us feel that a story is indeed a story. Furthermore, the types of conflict we see in a text affect our enjoyment and understanding of it. Thus, although conflict has traditionally been viewed as a topic within the domain of literary analysis and criticism, it also has a proper role in the study of how children learn to read. If we are to determine what features of texts contribute to comprehensibility, memorability, and reading pleasure, we need to understand better what conflict is and how it operates in stories.

In a similar way, we have been led to consider other features of texts that may have important influences on comprehension and motivation. Among these, we have focused particular attention on features which derive from the relationship between an author and a reader. The popular children's story "The Tale of Benjamin Bunny" by Beatrix Potter exemplifies important elements in that relationship.

The text begins with a description of Benjamin Bunny's trip to the woods to visit his aunt, Mrs. Rabbit, and cousins--Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail, and Peter. Setting information, character description, and character interaction are conveyed almost entirely in third person narration. However, notice the narrative twist in the following excerpted paragraph:

> Old Mrs. Rabbit was a widow, she earned her living by knitting rabbit-wool mittens and muffatees (I once bought a pair at a bazaar). She also sold herbs, and rosemary tea, and rabbit-tobacco (which is what we call lavender).

Who are "I" and "we" in this example? How can the reader understand these comments and their relationship to the rest of the story? If the reader were to view the text as encompassing another level of social interaction--an author-to-reader level--beyond that of the obvious character interactions, he or she would go far in constructing a coherent and plausible explanation for these phrases. The "I" then becomes the author, Beatrix Potter, who speaks directly to the reader. She invites the reader to believe in the rabbit world which she has created--a world where rabbits sell muffatees at bazaars and people buy them. Potter even goes further in her attempts to communicate with the reader through the use of "we," referring to the reader, Potter herself, and presumably other humans or non-rabbits.

Beatrix Potter makes extensive use of direct author-to-reader communication. This style may contribute to the success of her stories. Her technique serves to draw the reader into the story, diminishing the distance created by the physical text. Direct address makes the reader feel as if gaining his or

her attention is important to the author. It is an acknowledgement on the part of the author that the readers' views and concerns are relevant to the story.

Author-to-reader text communication serves important functions in addition to the enhancement of reader involvement. Author commentary often adds meaning to a text through the elaboration or explication of story events. Key story ingredients such as foreshadowing, suspense, surprise, and satire are frequently conveyed through the utilization of some form of the author-reader relationship. We believe that recognition of the central role this aspect of text plays in stimulating reader interest and enhancing readers' understanding is important for educators.

A Theory of Stories

In order to understand conflict and rhetorical structure we need to define some terms. We have begun work on a theory which we call the social interaction model of reading (Bruce, 1980b). Briefly, a text is viewed as a form of communication, and communication implies social interaction. The social interaction that occurs within a text can be viewed as operating on various levels.

For the purposes of this paper we will gloss over some of

the distinctions made in Bruce (1980b) and consider only three of the levels of social interaction (see Figure 1). At level 0 we have the always-present communication that occurs between the real author and the real reader via the written text. Level 1 represents an implied communication between the implied author and the implied reader. Although we speak of the "author of a story," we cannot know whether the author visible to us accurately represents the views of the person by that name. That is, the author we see is really an implied author (Booth, 1961). In fact, the implied author is like the real author only to the extent that the real author correctly portrays her or his own beliefs, language, and values. In a similar fashion, the real reader differs from the implied reader. At the implied author-implied reader level, we will look at rhetorical forms, point of view, and inside view of characters. Finally, level 2 represents character-to-character social interactions. At the character-to-character level we will examine types of conflict, the response of characters to conflict, and the resolution of conflict.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Author-Reader Interactions

Basic rhetorical forms. We have defined six basic rhetorical forms. These forms define the relationship that exists between the implied author and the implied reader and their involvement in the story being told. Full definitions of these forms can be found in Bruce (1980b). For this paper we will define only two of them. A participant account is told in the first person. Its point of view is that of the implied author. Unlike the diary form, its implied reader is explicitly not the implied author. In the observer account the implied author is not a participant in the actions described. This form is signaled by the use of third person pronouns.

Point of view. In the case of observer accounts, the implied author takes on a perceptual point of view whenever she or he describes an action or a scene. This point of view may be that of a character, or a group of characters, or of no character. A point of view presented in one part of the text may or may not be consistent with that used elsewhere in the text. We have identified four important point-of-view types: The consistent single point of view always, or nearly always, shows events as they might be observed by a character, or a group of characters which stays together throughout the story. The double point of view shifts back and forth between two points of view,

but otherwise is like "consistent single." The inconsistent single point of view generally maintains the perceptual point of view of one character, but occasionally shifts to views unavailable to that character. The shifting point of view does not maintain a consistent perceptual point of view.

We have also made a distinction between two types of "main" characters in stories. The focus character is the one whom the story is about, that is, the one who is most involved in the principal events of the story. The point-of-view character is the one through whose eyes or over whose shoulder we see the events. Often, of course, a single character fills both of these roles.

Inside view. We define inside view to be the portrayal of a character's thoughts and feelings. The implied author may show us anything from the surface of a character to a deep insight into his or her perceptions, emotions, ideas, and so on. The type of inside view presented interacts in intricate ways with the point-of-view type. For example, a consistent single point of view permits, though it does not require, a deep inside view of one character. A shifting point of view, on the other hand, cannot contain any one deep inside view and usually makes any inside view difficult to maintain.

The scheme presented here calls into question the usual breakdowns of stories into a handful of categories. Consider, for example, the traditional point-of-view categories (Perrine, 1966): objective, omniscient, and limited omniscient. Each of these captures only a few of the many possibilities outlined above or else is ambiguous with respect to which category is intended. The objective structure usually implies limited inside views and no consistent perceptual point of view. However, it is occasionally applied to stories with a consistent point of view but no inside view. Such problems in definition lead to difficulties in analyzing stories. These difficulties in turn were a principal motivation for the development of our taxonomy.

Character-to-Character Interactions

We saw in the "Little Red Riding Hood" example that removing conflict from a story also removes its reason for being. Why is conflict so important? There are a number of reasons. First of all, conflicts involve situations or events that are unusual, that are extraordinary, or that in some way alter the status quo. In a sense they make a story newsworthy. Second, conflicts consist of unknown and uncertain factors which can generate a sense of mystery, curiosity, or suspense and can lead to surprise. We have the feeling that something is going to happen in a conflict, that things are not in a stable state. We wonder,

for example, how will the conflict progress? Will it reach a resolution? Third, our interest in the resolution of a conflict relates to our concern for the characters we have come to care about in a story. Their conflicts are important for them, hence for us. Fourth, their conflicts and attempts at resolution can be associated with the conflicts in our experience. People read about conflict partly because conflicts are common in human interactions. Finally, conflicts can be rich, varied, intricate, and complex in the path they take from their initial materialization to their subsequent resolution. Thus, we are intrigued by the possibilities inherent in the path towards resolution. Some of these intricacies are suggested by the definitions to follow.

Conflict types. Conflict is a situation in which a character or characters are unable to achieve one or more of their desired goals. We define three types of conflict: interpersonal, internal, and environmental. An interpersonal conflict exists when two or more characters maintain incompatible goals. An internal conflict appears when a single character maintains two or more incompatible goals. An environmental conflict exists when a character's goal is hampered by nature, society, or fate. One could study an interpersonal or even an internal conflict from any of the opposing viewpoints.

Responses to conflicts. In order to study the development of conflict in a story, we need to consider how characters respond to conflicts. A response mode is a verbalization, a thought, or an action that a character makes subsequent to and related to the conflict. This implies that the participant, at some level, was aware of his or her involvement in the conflict.

A response mode might or might not be a move predicated to achieve the desired goal. For example, devising a clever solution can be seen as an obvious attempt to attain a goal, whereas engaging in an argument about whether to embark on some course of action toward the goal would be counterproductive. One could also talk about response modes that are believable or reasonable in relationship to the goal, or responses that tend to escalate or de-escalate a conflict. More importantly, one could talk about response modes that are "constructive" in relation to the goal, i.e., responses that are more likely to bring about the achievement of the goal.

Conflict resolution. An important element in the structure of story conflict which needs definition is resolution. A resolution is a working out of the conflict or an end to the original conflict. From an individual character perspective, it is the relationship between the character and the original goal. That relationship can exist in any of five states. The character

could achieve the original goal; partially achieve the goal (essentially a compromise); forsake the goal, willingly and completely giving it up; forsake the original goal but formulate and adopt a new goal; or fail to a achieve the goal and accept the failure, thus abandoning the goal. Finally, in a sixth, unresolved state, the character could fail to achieve the original goal but not abandon it. He or she would still be embroiled in the original conflict and might well attempt an alternate response mode.

Initial Story Survey

The formalizations of rhetorical structure and conflict which we have developed provide a useful framework in which to study children's stories. In order to apply notions made explicit by our analysis, we devised a coding form intended for use with primary-level children's texts. The form is composed of questions on conflict type, response and resolution modes, rhetorical form, point of view, and inside view. In addition, it includes a single metric of conflict complexity we have devised which takes into account such factors as: the number of conflicts per story, the number of different types of conflict, the number of participants involved in story conflicts, the intensity of each conflict, the length of time story conflicts remain in focus, the number of response modes utilized, etc.

We had three main purposes in conducting our initial story survey: (a) to determine the prevalence and distribution of the story features illuminated by our analysis in a sample of children's texts; (b) to examine the relationship between traditional measures of story complexity, the most well known of these being readability formulas, and our own conflict complexity measure in the sample of texts chosen; and (c) to explore relationships that might exist between preference ratings of the stories and the coding of story features such as conflict type, response modes, and inside view. We selected a sample of 32 children's texts composed of 16 upper-level primary and 16 lower-level primary stories distributed evenly among four groups: popular trade books, random trade books, widely read basal stories, and stories from other educational texts. We then computed the Fog (Klare, 1963) and Spache (1978) readability formulas on each of the stories in the sample. Five adult raters were asked to read the 32 stories in the sample and then rank them in order of preference. At a different time, the five raters coded the stories using the form discussed above.

We found 100% agreement among raters that 29 out of the 32 stories exhibited conflict. This finding points to the predominance of conflict in stories, lending support to our claims concerning the importance of story conflict. It is

interesting to note that one rater saw conflict in every story. There was 80% agreement among raters that the remaining three stories did not contain conflict. All three of these stories were lower-level primary texts. Although these numbers are small, this finding, if corroborated in a larger study, could raise questions about the traditional emphasis placed on vocabulary and sentence length in beginning readers. Perhaps we are unnecessarily forsaking important text features, such as conflict, which often lend structure, cohesiveness, excitement, and diversity to stories.

Of the three types of conflict discussed above, interpersonal conflict was found to be more frequent and more widespread in our sample. Twenty-eight out of 32 stories exhibited interpersonal conflict, 25 out of 32 stories had environmental conflict, and 8 out of the 32 exhibited internal conflict. Thus, internal conflict is a relatively infrequent form in the children's stories sampled. When raters were asked to code conflict type for the two most important conflicts in each story, the results were as follows: 59.34% interpersonal conflict, 34.14% environmental conflict, and 6.50% internal conflict. We calculated the distribution of conflict types for the four groups in our sample. Interpersonal conflict was found to be most prevalent in all groups except the popular basal

category, where environmental conflicts outnumbered the other two forms. This trend was even more pronounced for the lower-level stories. Lower-level random trade stories had the same number of environmental and interpersonal conflicts and no internal conflicts. Lower-level popular trade stories and other educational texts exhibited fewer environmental than interpersonal conflicts and still fewer internal conflicts. However, in the lower-level popular basal category, environmental conflicts outnumbered interpersonal conflicts by 6 to 1, and there were no internal conflicts. For children whose reading exposure is largely limited to school text, this somewhat unusual distribution of conflict types and overabundance of environmental conflicts in basal stories may lead to difficulty in understanding conflict forms encountered in reading other texts.

Examination of inside view reported for the 32 stories in our sample reveals an increase in the incidence of high inside view in the upper-level stories: 68.7% of the upper-level texts in the sample contained high inside views as compared to only 18.7% of the lower-level primary texts. This trend was even more pronounced for the basal stories in the sample: 100% of the upper-level basal stories displayed high inside views of characters; none of the lower-level basals provided similar inside views. This abrupt shift in a key story feature such as

inside view is an important finding to investigate further, for it points to a possible explanation for some of the difficulty children encounter in the transition from lower- to upper-level primary reading.

A second aim of our study was to determine if a relationship existed between the readability scores on our sample, which purport to measure story complexity, and our own conflict complexity measure. Raters' conflict complexity metrics were transcribed from the coding forms and then averaged across raters for each story. Next, we calculated both the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient and the Spearman rank correlation coefficient for the Fog readability measures versus the average conflict metrics for the 32 stories. Neither of these coefficients achieved conventional levels of statistical significance (Pearson r = 0.298; Spearman r = 0.161). The low correlation suggests that traditional readability measures may be missing important facets of what makes a story complex (see also Bruce & Newman, 1978).

A third aim of our study was to look at the relationship between higher-level features of stories and readers' preferences. Using the Spearman rank method we found a statistically significant correlation (r = .575, p < .01) between the amount of inside view (averaging across five raters'

judgments of this feature) and reader preference. The results are still significant when calculated separately for upper-level or lower-level texts. This result is for adult ratings of inside view and preference. Nevertheless, it suggests the potential importance of inside view as a rhetorical device for creating and maintaining reader interest.

Implications

Our model of author-reader interactions and conflict is one step towards a richer language for discussing stories and for enhancing children's understanding of stories. Its most important contribution may lie in furthering the dialogue between teachers and students regarding the literature which they read. This new language also permits us to examine some other issues more effectively.

One issue is that of defining the readability of texts. The problems children encounter in comprehension may lie not just in the length of sentences or word difficulty, as traditional readability formulas suggest, but in the complexity of the rhetorical structure or the conflicts portrayed in the story. For example, responding to conflict using deception requires a character to view the world from another character's point of view (see the analysis of "Hansel and Gretel" in Bruce & Newman, 1978). Such a shift necessitates inferences that produce a

greater overall complexity in the story than there would be if the conflict were confronted directly. Hence, younger children may have difficulty understanding certain stories because they include complex conflict sequences that previously went unnoticed (Bruce, 1980a).

Another issue is reader involvement. If conflict in real-life situations has the power to arouse and engage human interest and generate excitement, mystery, curiosity, suspense, and surprise, it is important to study what types and features of conflict in stories could generate the same excitement for a reader. Also, the rhetorical structure/point of view combinations differ in their effect on reader involvement. For instance, an observer account with a shifting point of view and low inside views tends to discourage reader involvement with any one character. We need to know how these effects occur and what the distribution of the rhetorical structure/point-of-view types is in children's stories.

Another result of these studies could be better criteria for text design and selection. Complaints leveled at some educational texts claim that the conflicts that do exist in stories are monotonous and uninspired (Blom, Waite, & Zimet, 1970). On the other hand, fairy tales are said to have survived precisely because they retain familiar conflict patterns in a

simple form (Bettelheim, 1976). By applying our model, we hope to be able to articulate criteria which will improve the quality of children's stories.

Children's difficulties in understanding texts might be due to mismatched expectations arising from cultural differences. Smitherman (1977) has argued that in black folk tales, to take one example, characters frequently respond to conflict by engaging in clever deception. "The underdog wins by outsmarting his opponent" is a common conflict theme. Also, the black folk tales have a high incidence of commentary by the author, and other distinctive rhetorical structures. Further study of stories from different cultures and subcultures may reveal other distinct patterns. This might indicate the need to diversify the diet of stories given to children.

Conclusion

Our studies of children's stories are highlighting features which may account for reader involvement with characters and the implied author, for reader enjoyment, and for difficulty in comprehension. We have been led to consider features which have traditionally been viewed as being in the domain of literary analysis rather than that of reading research. Thus, although these features have direct implications for reading, our examination has taken us far afield from some traditional

categories of reading research, such as word and sentence difficulty. We believe it is useful to continue this exploration.

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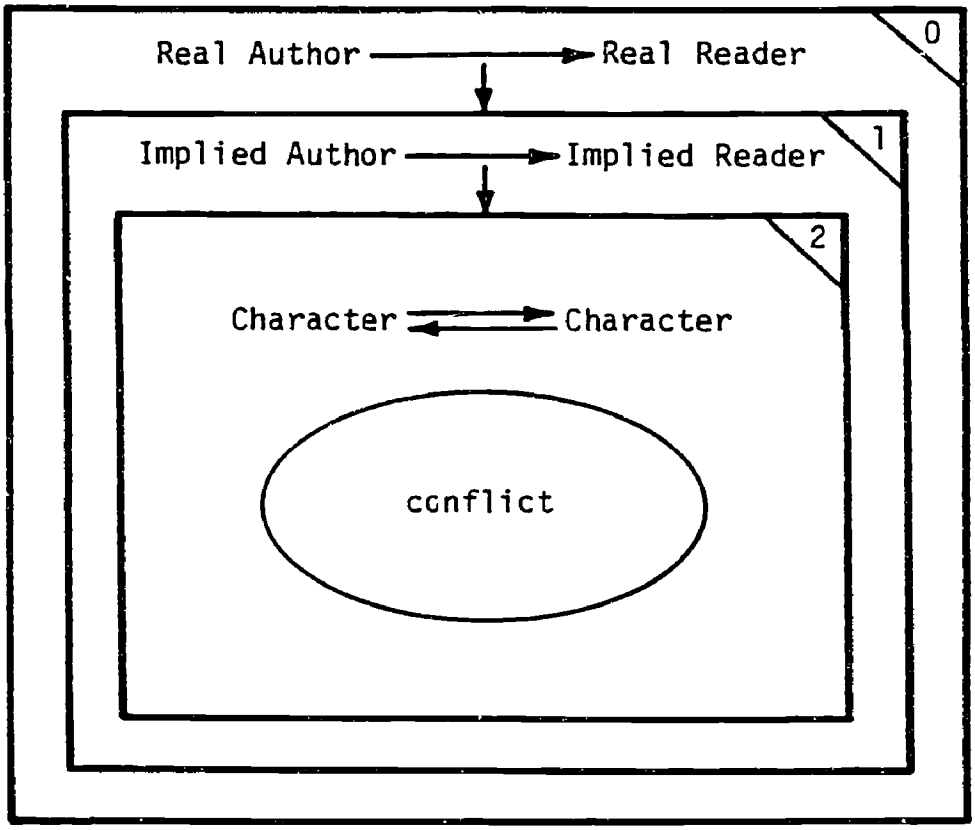
Figure Caption

Figure 1. Levels of communication for a single story.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Real Author
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1
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Character
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